

EDITORIALS

What Oregonians want

A lot of environmental groups these days object to the practice of logging and replanting federal forests devastated by wildfire. Chainsaws and saplings aren't always the proper recipe for forest regeneration, of course. But the idea that we should sit by and work on our macrame while valuable timber topples to the ground is shared by so few people that it could accurately be called a fringe view.

Like most people, environmentalists don't like to be called fringe dwellers. But don't take our word for it. Consider the results of a forest management survey involving hundreds of registered voters across the state. The survey, according to *The Oregonian*, found that 75 percent of Oregonians believe logging and replanting should follow wildfires. It should be noted that the group sponsoring the survey — Communities for Healthy Forests — would be very happy with this result. Still, it was conducted by an independent polling company, Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall Inc., of Portland.

Oregon is a state that voted solidly for John Kerry last year. It is a state in which the governorship and four of five House seats are held by Democrats. It is a state whose voters opted to give salmon and parks a constitutionally dedicated chunk of Lottery revenue. If three-quarters of people here consider the leave-it-don't-log-it method of wildfire recovery a little nutty, you can only imagine what people in the rest of the country think. And their opinions matter, too, because we're talking about the management of federal lands here, and federal lands belong to everybody, whether they're in Oregon or Mississippi.

Which brings us to Rep. Greg Walden and Sen. Gordon Smith, a pair of federal lawmakers who've suddenly found themselves linked, in bizarre fashion, to a forest service blunder that led recently to the logging within a botanical reserve near Grants Pass. Federal foresters accidentally mis-marked the boundaries of the Fiddler Timber Sale, which included trees killed by the 2002 Biscuit Fire. As a result, loggers cut 10 to 17 acres of the 352-acre Babyfoot Lake Botanical Area. The blunder was minuscule, it isn't a policy matter, and Walden and Smith had nothing at all to do with it.

But that hasn't stopped a coalition of environmental groups called the United Forest Defense Campaign from drawing some dots and trying to connect them. Smith and Walden have linked the group because they want to speed up the wildfire-recovery process, which now can take years. And the Babyfoot blunder, according to UFDC Communications Coordinator Steve Holmer, is exactly why such legislation — legislation that would "give the government carte blanche to expedite logging in the wake of wildfires" — shouldn't happen.

What does it say about this coalition's position that the most potent recent argument in its favor is a mapping and marking blunder that affected about a dozen acres? Talk about a stretch.

Meanwhile, evidence of the need for legislation speeding up the recovery process abounds. Two years ago, the B&B and Link fires burned more than 90,000 acres in Central Oregon, most of them within the Deschutes National Forest. The final environmental impact statement for the recovery was released this June, almost two years after the fires began, and includes plans to conduct salvage logging on only 10 percent of the burned area within the national forest. Environmentalists appealed the plan unsuccessfully, and a record of decision was signed this month. Since then, three timber sales have been awarded. And just last week, a number of environmental groups, including the Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project, the Sierra Club and the Sisters Forest Planning Committee, filed a motion for a preliminary injunction in U.S. District Court in Portland.

It looks to us that Smith and Walden, by defending a fire-recovery process three out of every four Oregonians support, are doing exactly what they're supposed to do. They're advocating on behalf of their constituents. Groups like the United Forest Defense Campaign and the Sisters Forest Planning Committee, meanwhile, are doing exactly what they so often do. They're speaking for the fringe. It's no wonder many more Oregonians polled this summer thought favorably of the timber industry (67 percent) than environmental groups (53 percent). And it's with an appreciation for irony that we await the characterization of whatever legislation Smith, Walden and like-minded lawmakers produce as extreme.